

**Transcript of digitally recorded interview with Thomas Fabian**  
**Second session: September 15, 2009**  
**Place: Fabian home, 5412 Hamilton Ave., Cheyenne, Wyoming 82009**  
**Interview and transcription: Mark Junge**

Mark: Alright, now, what was it we forgot yesterday?

Thomas: Oh, some of the stuff that I thought was kinda amusing you might throw in there.

Mark: Sure, sure. Well, let me put something on tape, here, just before you start. Today is the fifteenth of September, 2009. My name is Mark Junge and I'm in the home of Tom and Isabel Fabian at 5412 Hamilton in Cheyenne. And we're going to talk again today with Tom about some of his life experiences, particularly about his military career. But I think he wants to talk a little bit about some things he maybe forgot yesterday. OK, go ahead, shoot. What have you got?

Thomas: Well ....

Mark: What have you got?

Thomas: I guess ... when I was born my sister, Mary, was very, very disappointed. She didn't want another baby. She wanted a piano instead.

Mark: [laughs] A piano?

Thomas: So she kinda even run away from home for awhile until she got used to the fact that I was a boy and not another girl. But that's what she wanted. She wanted a piano instead of another baby. She was the oldest in the family and she's the one that took care of all the babies.

Mark: She expected her mother to deliver a piano? [laughs]

Thomas: Yeah, I guess so. I don't know what it was. And the doctor that took care of my mother during her pregnancy said it seemed like my mother was having another baby every time the moon was full.

[Thomas and Mark laugh]

Thomas: And my sister, Mary, always took charge of the youngest one and the babies. So I thought I'd throw that in there.

Mark: That's pretty funny.

Thomas: In the family we didn't get along all that well, especially the younger ones. We were always fighting or teasing. And the worst teaser was Margaret. She was, what, the

fourth in line of being the youngest. She made a lot of fun of everybody and, uh, a high-strung girl and liked to do things like that. She especially liked to make fun of me. I remember one time we got in a fight over somethin'. I don't know what it was but my mother was ironing on the ironing board like this and we were going around and around the ironing board. And she caught, she got ahold of me and had me by the legs so that I was skippin' around on one foot and she kept hittin' me in the nose with her fist and give me a real bad bloody nose. And my mother just let us go until it was over with. She just kept on ironing. I thought that was kinda funny when I was thinking about it.

She ... the reason ... one time at the dinner table she was teasin' me. And she always teased me about the shape of my head. She said, "Your head is shaped like a goose egg." [Mark and Thomas laugh] And I, I got so mad at her at the dinner table I grabbed a fork off the table and I leaned at her like that it just stuck in her arm and quivered there. And it was in there about an inch deep.

Mark: Omigosh.

Thomas: And she still had the scars in her arm. I think she probably still has the scars up there in Riverton ...of three little holes in her arm. Well, I really got punished for that. Punishment, usually, for doing things like that ... you went under the table and sat under the table while everybody else finished their dinner. That was my brother, George. He took over for my dad. I told you about that yesterday.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: But, uh, let's see .... We, we .... I told you about stealing copper and stuff like that

Mark: Um-hmm.

Thomas: ... yesterday. Well stealing was pretty common amongst kids in the, you know, teenage ... Usually stole stuff to eat. You didn't steal anything, like cars or anything like that. You just stole off of a ... They had a delivery truck, the Union Pacific Store had a delivery truck. And then, the kids, just every time there was a chance to run over there and grab somethin' off that delivery truck they'd do it. My brother, Stan and his good friend, Angelo, they had a cabin out in the ... away from the town a little ways, about a half a mile away. And that place there was loaded with groceries that was stolen from the Union Pacific Store. They had an old piano crate there and that was full of canned goods. They'd tell, they'd give each other assignments when they got to the cabin and said, "We need a can of pears, so you go get a can of pears"

[Mark and Thomas laugh]

Thomas: And then you ... "We need some peas over here and you go get a can of peas. And they'd go out and try to get whatever they could if, without getting' caught. Uhhh, lessee .... They had quite an inventory at the cabin, but like I say it was only stuff to eat.

One time my brother, George, he used to take me fishing. And we'd to fishing at the Muddy Creek there around Cumberland there. And he had a secret place. He was gonna take me to a secret place, catch these suckers. That's all there was in this crick, was suckers. We brought the suckers home to my mother and she cooked 'em and she made 'em very edible, very good-tasting fish.

Mark: Oh, yeah.

Thomas: Well, there was a ... I had a willow for a pole, and we used to order the fishing line from Montgomery Ward or Sears-Roebuck and buy a whole spool of it, tie it on the end of that and have a cork on the line and you'd just throw it out there with a worm on a hook and when you see the cork go up and down like that you pulled it. And, boy I hooked a big sucker [laughs] that time. And he had to come and help me get it out and, boy, I was so proud of that fish. Took it home to my mother and she cooked it up and we had a nice, big dinner. That seems ... I seem to remember that. On the way fishing and on the way home you had to cross a railroad bridge.

Mark: Well thank you. Isabel just brought me some coffee.

Thomas: ... and, uh, goin' across this bridge were ties laid like this, and they didn't cover the space in between the ties. And I was just a little guy. I guess I musta been four or five years old. And I crawled across that thing. I couldn't walk. I was scared to walk across it 'cause you'd look down and ... then my brothers just kept on a-walkin' and left me behind about half a mile to catch up after I got over, across the bridge. Oh, god. That was really somethin'. I used to love to go fishing with 'em, though.

Then I gotta tell ya about the swimming pools in Superior. Way it got started was, the bunch of kids got together and built a dam across a little crick where they pumped mine water out of the mine. And they dammed this mine water up and they made a swimming pool there, right in front of, right in the middle of town where people up on the hills could look down and see 'em. They went in there and skinny-dipped, you know. [laughs] And they'd, we'd all go in that pool there, and in the mornings if you were the first one in there the water was nice and clear but after a few kids ...

Mark: [laughs]

Thomas: ... jumped in there it was just as muddy as could be. But, anyway, that got the people in the hierarchy of Superior ... got to thinkin' about buildin' a pool. And, by gosh, they got the WPA [Works Progress Administration] to build one. That was during the Depression there. They built that nice, concrete swimming pool. Well, me and my two friends up on "C" hill, we decided, by gosh, I wasn't gonna go to that pool. We was gonna have a pool to ourself. So we built one down at the bottom of the hill where we lived and we dammed up mine water again and we had our own, private little pool, just the three of us. Then we decided, "By gosh, we're gonna go up to another place where there was mine water comin' out of the mine. And we were gonna go up there and damn that, and make a nice pool there because there was a nice ditch there and it would be easy to do it. We used

to dam it with ... by filling gunny sacks with dirt and piling 'em on. And we started across this place and, as it was, it was private property. A guy by the name of Applegate. And he was a guy that rode a horse and he raised horses and all that kind of stuff. And so we were walkin' across there with a shovel, and pick, and whatever we thought we needed to damn that crick up there. And we were on his private property. He come gallopin' out there on his horse, says, "What are you guys gonna do?" And we said, "Ah, we're gonna build a dam up here and make a little swimmin' pool. He says, "By God, you ain't gonna do anything like that." He says, "If you don't get out of here and get out of here real quick I'm gonna whip your ass until your nose bleeds." [Mark and Thomas laugh] And he kept sayin' that all the while he escorted us off his property. "Go on, get outta here. I'm gonna whip your ass until your nose bleeds." I'll never forget that, either. Well, we didn't get that dam made ... [laughs] Aw, shoot. That was Applegate. [pauses to look over another story on his note sheet].

Uh ... yeah, I got that one. [pause] Uh, all the marriages in the family my mother was against. My mother didn't feel that any of us shoulda got married. I think that went from day one until ... I was the last one to get married, and I think she was against marriage. She wanted to keep her family together. And, God, when my brother, Stan, I ... he was the first of the three boys that got married and, man, it ...it broke my heart to see him leave the family. I never did get over that [laughs].

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: I couldn't understand why that woman was takin' ... was takin' one of our brothers away ... one of my brothers away when we had ... when I had six sisters to give her. She wanted ....

Mark: [laughs] You and Stan were pretty ... Ston, were pretty close.

Thomas: Oh, yeah, the three of us were. They were quite a bit older than me though. They didn't take me.... My two sisters, Margaret and Helen took care of me more than anybody. I got ... I got to know them better than anybody. Ston and George were ten years older than I was and it made a big difference. They ... they really ... I really wasn't buddies with them until I got to be a teenager. Played baseball with 'em and went fishin' with 'em and stuff like that.

Mark: You were always the kid brother.

Thomas: Yeah ... yeah. Baby brother ... to all of 'em. Oh, another time ... I gotta tell ya about another thing that I stole. I stole a silver dollar off of one of ...my sister, Helen. She kept her little, small change up in the kitchen cabinet. And I got up there and she had a cup with change in it and she had a silver dollar. And I snuck that silver dollar out of there. I went down to the company store and I bought a dollar's worth of candy. And, boy, that was a big sack of candy. It lasted me all day and I gave all my friends some candy and just had a real ball with all that candy. And, boy, when I got caught at that, too, I paid for it.

Mark: [laughs] Did your mother whip ya?

Thomas: Oh, my mother never did whip me. It was my brother, George, that took over for my dad.

Mark: Oh, yeah.

Thomas: I told you yesterday that my dad called him into the hospital when he tied, told him he was gonna have to be the head of the family. And he took "the head of the family" literally. He's the only father that I really knew. And he ... he dealt out punishment.

Mark: What did he do?

Thomas: What do you mean, "What did he do?"

Mark: Did he take a stick to ya?

Thomas: Oh, no. Usually ... usually make you get under the table, or get behind the stove, or he'd isolate you for ....

Mark: Oh he isolated you ....

Thomas: Yeah, isolated you from everybody for a day or so.

Mark: Like prison.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: OK.

Thomas: Yeah. Oh, [looks at his notes] shivaries. When people got married in Superior they called ... the kids all got together and had what they call a "shivaree" I don't know whether you've heard of that but they tied tin cans to the car and all that kind of stuff. And you'd go there at the wedding when they were havin' the dinner or after the wedding. And he'd have to come out with a roll of dimes or something and give everybody a dime and that was a common occurrence.

Mark: Shiv ... do you remember any in particular?

Thomas: Ohhhh ... yeah, my brother, for one. My brother, Stan, when he got married. Just about anybody that got married. Everybody knew everybody so the kids all knew. If somebody was getting married they'd all gang up on 'em. Course, a roll of dimes would take care of all the kids that got into that. I don't know, I guess that covers it pretty good, I guess, but, uh ... early time here.

Mark: OK. Well, those are good stories.

Isabel: Superior was like one, big family, really. Everyone got together for everything in, uh ... just like a big family.

Mark: And people ... if a kid got in trouble, I mean, it was ...he was trouble, maybe, with the whole neighborhood, not just. Not just as ....

Isabel: Well, they were always in on it, too.

Mark: Oh, they were always in on it.

Isabel: There was always a gang of kids that played together, yeah.

Mark: Yeah. But nothin' malicious, right?

Thomas: No. No. The worst thing I ever did was stick that fork in my sister's arm. [laughs] That coulda been serious. I coulda hit her in the eye or anything. I just flung it across really hard and it just happened to just hit her just right.

Mark: Well, did ... the question is: did she leave you alone after that?

Thomas: Oh, no. She couldn't hardly wait to get back at me. [laughs] She was quite a gal, that Margaret. She was ... I think she had more pep than any of us. And, oh, then there was another thing that I gotta tell ya about that she did. She had a real good friend. Her name was Edith. And for her birthday Edith got a real pretty doll. And my sister was so jealous that she got this doll, so ... her little mind got to workin' and she waited until Edith left to go in the house or eat, or something, and Edith left the doll layin' there. And my sister, Margaret, took that little doll. And the little doll had a pair of panties or a diaper on, and she went out and got some chicken crap and put it in there, rolled it up ... [laughs]

Mark: In the diaper?

Thomas: Yeah and oh, when she come out and saw that she was screamin' and yellin' and my sister, Margaret, she was just a person like that, she ....

Mark: [laughs] She was ornery.

Thomas: Oh, she was. Yes, you bet, and she was very jealous of anybody that had anything that she didn't have. She carried a doll around but it wasn't anything like this real pretty doll that Edith got. So she fixed her with that.

Mark: Do you think, Tom ... which sister of yours was more like your mom?

Thomas: Oh, my sister, Dorothy, I guess. The one next to me. She was two years older than me, I think, so my mom ...she was my mother's pet. She used to tell all about me goin' to school. We went to school together and anytime I got in trouble in school she'd go right to

mom. My mom knew what was goin' on in school about me. Ah, I wasn't bad in school, though. I never got in trouble in school.

Mark: Well, yeah, I can imagine you were ... I think you were probably a pretty good kid. Am I right?

Thomas: [laughs] Yeah, I wasn't bad.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Oh, we did things that ... I, uh ... stealing and stuff like that but I really don't think it was all that bad.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: We never did steal anything that hurt anybody. It was mostly like I say, always for food, somethin' to eat.

Mark: What did you think ... well, you didn't go hungry, did ya?

Thomas: No. Because we raised these chickens and we raised the hogs and planted a nice garden and stuff like that. And my mother used to go to the U.P. Store and she'd get, you know, make soup out of soup meat and cheaper cuts of meat.

Isabel: You got bones for nothing in those days. You'd go to the grocery store and the butcher'd give you the bones for nothing.

Thomas: Yeah, the butcher had what they called "dog bones" and my mother used to get those dog bones and boil 'em up and make soup out of 'em. See, she could make soup out of almost anything.

Mark: She was pretty amazing, wasn't she?

Thomas: Oh, she was really handy at cooking. She was always cooking. She cooked every day. Every day. We all got breakfast, and we all got lunch and we all had a dinner in the evening.

Mark: Did you take your lunch to school or did you come home?

Thomas: No, we come home from school. Yeah. She had a lunch prepared for us at home. It was about a half a mile walk to school, I guess.

Mark: Well, she was more of a ... I got to thinkin' about this last night. She was more of a cook. She didn't sew much, right?

Thomas: No, but she could sew.

Mark: She could sew?

Thomas: She did sew. And she did a lotta patchin' the clothes and stuff like that.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Yes.

Mark: Darning socks.

Thomas: I don't think ... yeah, stuff like that. She didn't make clothes, not that I remember any clothes she made ...

Mark: Did she make rag rugs?

Thomas: Oh, yes, yes.

Mark: My mother used to do that.

Isabel: [at same time Thomas is talking] My mother made rag rugs ... a lot of 'em.

Thomas: Her folks [referring to Isabel] did that, too. In fact, she's got a ... she's got a loom downstairs.

Mark: Do ya?

Isabel: I have the loom.

Mark: Oh, that's right. You showed me that.

Isabel: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah. Well, what was the ... in your opinion what was the U.P. like? I mean, was it a good company or ... you know, were they uncaring, or were they caring, or what kind of a company were they?

Thomas: Oh, I thought they very caring. The people that worked for 'em, the guys that worked for 'em always cussed the Union Pacific Coal Company, called 'em cheap and all that. But, by God, they made a good living.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Even during the Depression, I mean, they worked two, three days a week, maybe, and they made, uh ... the Depression didn't affect 'em a heckuva lot there. They managed to get through there in pretty good shape.



Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: In other words, there wasn't no people starvin' and there wasn't any people leavin' town because they didn't have a job. They made out alright in the mines, there.

Mark: Everybody ... there wasn't any such thing as unemployment, then ... in Superior.

Thomas: No, not really. Just for the younger kids that ... when the ... back in those days kids couldn't get a job. Maybe deliverin' papers, somethin' like that, uh.... I used to go deliver sales slips at the Union Pacific Store, had-a, made 'em out every week. They had a bunch of stuff on there that was on sale, you know, and you'd take those and deliver 'em to all the houses in Superior ...

Mark: Ohhh.

Thomas: ... and they'd pay ya, they'd pay ya maybe fifty cents to deliver those things like that.

Mark: Was that your first job?

Thomas: Yeah. Stuff like that, yeah.

Mark: What did you do after that? Was what your next job?

Thomas: Well, it was just a weekly thing.

Mark: Oh, OK.

Thomas: And you can go down there and there was a bunch of kids wanted to deliver these things, you know, for fifty cents or a buck.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: And if you were first in line, or lucky, you got to deliver 'em. If not, you didn't get anything.

Mark: You didn't have a paper route?

Thomas: No, I didn't ... we didn't have a paper. Not that I know of. [he turns to his left and asks Isabel} Did we have a paper in Superior?

Isabel: Well, we did have ....

Thomas: *Rock Springs Rocket.*

Isabel: Yeah.

Thomas: But I don't ... I thought that come later.

Isabel: The Salt Lake paper.

Mark: *Salt Lake Tribune?*

Isabel: *Tribune*, yes.

Thomas: Yeah..

Mark: Yeah. Well, then, uh ... let's see...

Isabel: But I don't know who delivered it.

Mark: In the summertime you played ball. You didn't have a job in the summertime after school. I mean, uh, after school was out.

Thomas: No. Sometimes you were lucky and get somebody to hire .... I had a real nice job with a ... uh....

Isabel: Survey.

Thomas: Surveyor. He was a engineer. He was a petroleum engineer and he was a surveyor and he needed somebody to go out and hold this ... hold this rod for him to shoot at and ... and I remember he offered to pay me coupla dollars an hour to go and wander around the hills there around Point of Rocks and Thayer Junction ... and ... and there was seams o' rock there that were outcrops and he usually wanted to take three shot of this one here, one here, one here to get the slope of that particular rock. And I caught onto it pretty good. And he told me, he says, "Well," he says, "I was gonna pay you two dollars an hour." He says, "I'll pay you four dollars an hour instead. You did such a good job."

Mark: Whoa!

Thomas: But that lasted, oh, I guess it was a couple of weeks. So that was my first real job.

Mark: That was four dollars and hour in those days?

Thomas: I guess it was four dollars a day. Did I say four dollars an hour?

Mark: Yeah, I was gonna say ....

Thomas: No, it was two dollars a day.

Mark: Omigosh.

Thomas: Yeah, four dollars a day.

Mark: Well, it was still good pay.

Thomas: Oh, yes, it was. Hell, I was tickled to death with that, yeah.

Mark: Let's see ... what year would that have been?

Thomas: Oh, hell, it was when I was in ... I guess I musta been in junior high or something like that, I'd say.

Mark: But it was during the Depression.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah. How did ... did you feel the Depression at all when you were growin' up?

Thomas: Oh, I don't think it ... I don't think we were bothered too much about it, the kids were. They had their daily routine, you see. Played games and ....

Mark: Well, what I mean is ... is people suffered during the Depression. But I'm thinkin', "OK, here's a company town with a company store. Everybody was employed, you know, mining coal.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Maybe you guys didn't feel the Depression like other people in the rest of the country.

Thomas: Oh, no. Oh, no. Like, in the auto industry and the poor people down there on the farms in the Dust Bowl down there. They ... it was really bad for them. It was terrible for them.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: But in the coal mine industry I don't think it affected us as much.

Mark: Your mother didn't hafta ... she just did her normal scrimping and saving.

Thomas: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: We didn't have anybody workin' in the family except my brother, George. He was, like I said, seventeen years old and he was workin' the coal mines. I don't they made, maybe six dollars a day, somethin' like that.

Mark: Did he ... did he ... I'm curious about this, too. Did he resent the fact that he had to take over the family.

Thomas: No, he never ...

Mark: I mean, 'cause he lose his youth ... in a way?

Thomas: No, he never did complain about that, nope. Nope. I think he really took it serious when my death talked to him on his deathbed.

Mark: Yeah. So did he go out and get this job himself to help out the family?

Thomas: No. The superintendent knew about our plight. The superintendent's name was George Brown. And ...and, uh, he knew about the Fabian family and how my mother struggled with all those kids ... and every time there was a chance he'd give us a break. And that's the way he ...

Mark: This wasn't company policy, this was just George Brown.

Thomas: Oh, yeah.

Isabel: Yeah, he was a good man.

Thomas: That's right. Everybody liked him. He was a real good fella.

Mark: Was he like a mine superintendent?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: OK. I wonder how many people that town had. Was it ... did it seem crowded?

Thomas: How many what?

Mark: How many people? Was it crowded town or was it ....?

Thomas: Oh, no, it was about two thousand people, maybe, that's about it.

Mark: I don't know what they have no but it can't be that, can it?

Thomas: During ...

Isabel: Oh, no.

Thomas: During the war I think it got up around three thousand people but, uh ...

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: ...during those times I don't think it was much more than fifteen hundred, two thousand.

Mark: Well, Tom, when you ...now you didn't get your first real job until you were out of high school ....

Thomas: ...graduated from high school.

Mark: And then what'd you do?

Thomas: That George Brown, again, treated me good. He give me a job in the maintenance shop rather than give me a job inside the mine. It was a choice job. Everybody loved that. They wouldn't have to go into the mine. And he gave that job to me as an apprentice machinist.

Mark: Did he see some mechanical ability in you, is that it?

Thomas: Oh, I don't know. I don't think he knew me that well. He just ... he just said he was gonna ... instead of puttin' me in the mine ... probably because of my mother he ...

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: ...he ... he really felt for my mother.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: And I think that's probably the reason he let me go in the machine shop instead of in the mine.

Mark: Do you think you a special ability, though, mechanical ability?

Thomas: Uh, I don't think so. I learned a lot at that job there. I learned an awful lot at that ...

Isabel: You musta had it ... because he went on to work, uh, puttin' in these turbine generators in Westinghouse ... [rest is undecipherable].

Thomas: Well, I learned a lot in that machine shop. That's where I learned it. Then I ... after the mines closed in Superior the ... all that experience ... I went to work here in Cheyenne at the power plant down here as a mechanic and [microphone interruption].

Mark: At the big brick building ...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: ...down across from the newspaper office.

Thomas: [laughs]. Yeah, that old ... it's quite a place.

Mark: I'll bet.

Thomas: In there I ... while I was in there I got to know these engineers from Westinghouse that'd come in there and inspect our turbine generator every once in a while. And I guess they felt that I did alright on those jobs and when that plant shut down they offered me, Westinghouse offered me, to go to a job ... go to work for them.

Mark: After Cheyenne Light, Fuel and Power.

Thomas: Um-hmm.

Mark: But going back to your first job, now, did you like that job?

Thomas: Oh, sure. I was thrilled with it. I was tickled to death to work in the shop, yes. I was tickled to death to run those machines ... those ... steel lathes and drill presses and stuff like that. Oh, yeah, I liked that.

Mark: Were you good with your hands?

Thomas: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: But that job didn't, uh ... how long did that last?

Thomas: Well, until [his microphone slips from his shirt]

Mark: Oh here, let me put that back on ya. See ... the microphone just came off here. Let's see if I can [laughs] ... I'm kinda tethered to it, too. [laughs again] OK. OK. We're back on. Alright. Gosh, it just .... OK. So that job, how long did that job last?

Thomas: Well, I graduated in '40 and went into service...

Isabel: [undecipherable]

Thomas: ...went into service in forty two ... forty three. Yeah, I went to the service in '43.

Isabel: We moved here in '54. So until '54.

Thomas: So I had ... that job lasted about ten years, nine, ten years, somethin' like that.

Mark: Well, you had your service, military service in between.

Isabel: Yeah.

Thomas: No.

Isabel: Yes, you did..

Thomas: The military service in between what?

Isabel: Between ... between when you graduated and when we moved here.

Thomas: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Mark: Yeah, so. OK, now ... Pearl Harbor was bombed December 7, '41.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: A lotta guys just ran to the recruiting stations to sign up to fight. You guys didn't.

Thomas: No. Here's the way I go in [chuckles]. They were drafting, the draft was in session in those days and there was me and my brother, George, my older brother ...uh, we're eligible for the draft. He was quite a bit older ... but Stanley was married so he wasn't considered. And the draft board called me and George in to Rock Springs. And they just said that, "One of you two guys have to go".

Mark: Oh, they wouldn't have made you both go.

Thomas: No. He just ... and that was what come out of that meeting with them, is, They told us: "One of you two guys are gonna have to go." And so I told my brother, George, I says, "Well, George, you've been takin' care of the family," I says, "You better stay home and keep care of the family and I'll go volunteer. " I was gonna volunteer. So I went to Salt Lake and volunteered, uh ....

Mark: When was that? Was that '42 ... '43?

Thomas: Oh, it musta been '42.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah, '42. And I had to take a test for aviation cadets. I wanted to get in the aviation cadets. I had to take a test ...a hundred and fifty questions. And I had to make a 70 out of it. I made 72. [laughs] But that was good because only one out of four ...one out of four made the test. And then another ... with the physical ... and another one busted a lot of 'em with the physical. And I went through that thing. And then they sent me until there was,

uh, training for aviation cadet program at that time. I had to, you know, a certain class. I was in the class of 43-J. That's what they called it. Forty-three. I went in there in forty... I stayed at home for five ... for five or six months before they finally called me after I enlisted.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Thomas: I was sworn in and everything but they just didn't have anyplace to train me at that time ... train everybody at that time.

Mark: I was wondering, too, whether or not you had to pass this test with a lot of math.

Thomas: Yes.

Mark: Did they have a lot of math?

Thomas: Yes, they had a lotta math and a lotta mechanics.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: And that helped me.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: They had drawings of pumps and stuff like that. They'd say, "If you pushed this deal what would happen over here?" And I could figure all that out. And, uh ...oh, it was a general test: current events, vocabulary and, uh ... all kinds of stuff like that. I did pretty well on most of it. There was a lot of 'em didn't make it, I'll tell ya that.

Mark: One out of four.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah. Well, when you were a kid .... You said you crossed these railroad tracks and you got scared lookin' down...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: ...why would you wanta go into aviation?

Thomas: [laughs] I don't know. I wanted to fly real bad. I wanted to fly. One Christmas, I remember, I wanted ... I wanted a zeppelin. And my sister, Mary, and Julia found one someplace, in a store, a toy store or some .... It's about that long, I guess, and, boy, it was a beautiful thing.

Mark: About twenty inches.



Thomas: And they had Santa Claus bring me that zeppelin to me and, boy, I was so proud of that thing. It was tied onto a string and I'd drag it around. That was in the time of the *Hindenburg* [zeppelin explosion in Lakehurst, N.J. on May 6, 1937]

Mark: Yeah. Well, why ... well, '37. Let's see, when was the *Hindenburg* ... '37? I can't remember, but why were you so fascinated with flying?

Thomas: I don't know. I just ... I just was. I, uh ....

Mark: Do you have a good sense of balance?

Thomas: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Mark: Because when you were flying', I could tell by those pictures. Things have a tendency to get...

Thomas: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Mark: a little disoriented.

Thomas: I had real problems when I first went into flying. I'll tell you, I got sick. That was the main thing for me. I just was really terrible sick.

Mark: Airsick?

Thomas: Oh, yeah. Boy it was bad for about two weeks. I just about didn't make it because of that. But finally it cleared up and then I was alright.

Mark: OK, so they finally called you about five, six months after you ...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: ...got sworn in.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Did you ... where did you go from Superior?

Thomas: Went to Nashville, Tennessee, what they called a classification center.

Mark: Didn't you go to Denver first?

Thomas: Yeah, well, that's where I got on a train and went from there to Nashville, Tennessee on the train.

Mark: Why couldn't you just take the U.P. to Nashville. I mean, why did you go to ...

Thomas: [laughs] Oh, no. hell, they wouldn't do anything like that. I had to report Denver at that -- what is it? -- the old Customs House down there, they called it. That's where they got us all together, these aviation cadets. They was from Wyoming, Colorado ... and most of 'em Colorado and Wyoming.

Mark: Now, did you know anybody when you went down to Denver or were you all alone?

Thomas: I knew probably my best friend. He took the test in Salt Lake after I did and he joined the cadets too. And we were in school together. Hell, I went to school with him from the sixth grade on through graduation. And he went into fighters.

Mark: What was his name?

Thomas: George [pronounces it "Lef-ko-wich"]

Mark: How do you spell that?

Thomas: L-E-V-K-U-L-I-C-H. [pronounces it "Lef-koo-lich"]

Mark: "Lef - ko - litch?" Is that Slovenian, too?

Thomas: He was, uh, I think he was Czechoslovakia. Czech, yeah.

Mark: OK. And he was your good friend, best friend since sixth grade?

Thomas: Yeah. We graduated together, we played football together, we, uh, went to town during the good days [laughs] and had a good time chasin' the girls and drinkin' beer and goin' to the dances and .... He was a very, very good friend of mine.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: And he just died about a year and a half ago. Two years ago, was it, Isabel?

Isabel: About.

Thomas: He lived in Craig [Colorado]. His dad bought a farm down in Craig and they left Superior just before the war. He went down there and bought a piece of land down there and they did really well down there.

Mark: What kind of a guy was he?

Thomas: George? Oh, [laughs] real good sense of humor. Real good sense of humor. Real good-lookin' guy. Never did get married. But, uh ... knew how to have a good time.

Mark: Why were you two attracted to each other? What made you such good friends?

Thomas: I don't know. We were very competitive against each other. Just to show ya how competitive we were, [laughs] we were in the pool hall down in White City, Superior, and I was playin' pool with another kid by the name of Jack Mullins. And Jack Mullins was probably the worst player in Sweetwater County. And George was on the sidelines. And he was rootin' for Jack. [laughs again] And he got me all flustered and I lost to Jack. I was considered a pretty good pool player. But I lost to Jack. And I turned around and I told George, I says, "One of these days I'm gonna take you out and I'm gonna kick the hell out of you."

Mark: [laughs]

Thomas: And he never said nothin'. He just walked away and then after a little bit he says, walked up to me and he says, "Tom, you wanna go outside?" I says, "Yeah, let's go outside." So we went outside and we duked it out. I'm not gonna say who won that fight, but, anyway, we became closer than ever after that fight.

Mark: Well, why are afraid to say who won the fight?

Thomas: [laughs] I just don't wanna. I just don't wanna say. I ....

Mark: Out of respect for George.

Thomas: It was ... it was quick. It was quick. I got him with a lucky punch and put him down. And it was over. He wanted to continue. I says, "No, I don't wanta fight anymore." So I walked away from him.

Mark: Isn't that interesting?

Thomas: Yeah. And then later in the day we went over to his house and – he was livin' with his brother, there, in kind of a bach ... a bachelor place and, uh ... we made amends and forgot it, but ....

Mark: And were good friends ever since.

Thomas: Oh, yeah. I think we got closer after that, than ever.

Mark: Isn't that ... isn't that the way it goes?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah, he ...

Mark: Well had you planned on joining the service together?

Thomas: Yes.

Mark: Had you?

Thomas: Yeah ... yeah. We signed together but I was called in early, earlier, for my tests and he was called a little bit later, I think. He was in Craig and I was in Superior and I got called from Superior and he got called from Craig and he took a test a coupla weeks later. In fact, he was stayin' at our house. He was bachin'. At our house he was a bachelor and workin' in the mine and my mother took him in as a boarder. And he paid my mother somethin' like, probably, twenty five dollars a month, somethin' like that. But he stayed together with us for about a year.

Mark: He was like a brother to you.

Thomas: Yeah. We lived in that shanty I was tellin' ya about that we had. We slept together. We had some really funny times.

Mark: Did you guys ever sneak out at night and pull some....

Thomas: Oh, yes. A lotta times. [laughs]

Mark: [laughs] Oh, gosh. Did ya ever get drunk together?

Thomas: Oh, God. [laughs again] Yes, yes. We did.

Mark: Well, I'm just ... I ask because these things kinda remind me of my youth, you know?

Thomas: Oh, we were, we were ... every Saturday night we, we'd go out, go to Rock Springs ... Play Mor Ballroom in Rock Springs ... go there, I wasn't, we weren't dancers but we were drinkers.

Mark: The Pla Mor Ballroom.

Thomas: Yeah.

Thomas: Now, you weren't at that time friends with Isabel, right?

Thomas: Oh, I knew her ... but that's all.

Mark: But there wasn't nothin' goin' on.

Thomas: No, no.

Mark: Why not?

Thomas: I don't know. Probably because I was runnin' around with a girl in Rock Springs.

Isabel: I wasn't wild like he was.

Mark: You weren't wild like he was. [laughs]

Isabel: My mother would have shut me up in a room.

Mark: I don't know, have you read his diary, Isabel?

Isabel: I haven't read it, no.

Mark: It's interesting. There's nothin' in there that would be incriminating, I guess you'd call it. But I do remember you writing about some woman named Louise.

Thomas: Uh-hm.

Isabel: Oh, yeah.

Mark: And you got mad at her and you wrote it in your diary somethin' like: "She's mad because I'm writing to Isabel ..."

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: "...well, I don't give a damn." [Mark and Thomas laugh]

Isabel: Oh, is that what he said?

Mark: Somethin' like that. He says, "I don't give a damn about her if that's how she feels about me.

Thomas: Oh, she was a ... she was a good girl, too. She was a nice person.

Isabel: Yeah, she ...we became friends, too. She worked for the Union Pacific Coal Company in the office there and she called me in one day when I was workin' in Rock Springs going with him. He was in the service.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. Well, that wasn't exactly the girl you left behind because you were chasin' all the girls. Right?

Thomas: Yeah, I think that's probably true.[laughs]. Never had any ... well, that Louise, I run around with her for a couple of years, I think.

Mark: Um, now, so you go from Denver to Nashville.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: And what camp was that at Nashville? ... Remember?

Thomas: It was a classification center...

Mark: OK.

Thomas: ... Army Air Force's classification center. What they did there was determine with tests and all kind, well, all kinds of physical and mental tests, whether you would be a pilot or a bombardier. And I managed to ... uh, me and George went together. We both made pilot.

Mark: And you both lived through all this.

Thomas: Yeah. Well, we, uh ...we went through primary flight school and -- what the heck was the other one? -- pre-flight school and then primary. We went together there. We flew together in primary school. And we took the tests in Maxwell Field, Alabama, to get indoctrinated in aviation. And then we actually went to a flight school ... from there.

Mark: OK. Now, at this time ...didn't you tell me yesterday that you had some teeth problems and that ... Where was the doctor? Was he in Denver or was in ....

Thomas: The teeth?

Mark: Yeah, yeah.

Thomas: That's why I enlisted in Salt Lake, and, uh ... I was afraid that they were going to wash me out because of my bad teeth. So I had ... I ... my mother come across with a hundred bucks to fix my teeth.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: I don't know where she got it from. She musta had it stashed away someplace. But, uh, I had my teeth fixed there ... like I told you I went to that dentist and he looked in there and he ... a partial plate, and a permanent bridge and pulled, extracted, eight teeth. And all for a hundred dollars.

Mark: Wow.

Thomas: And then when I got into the military they told me, hell, they would've fixed my teeth. They wouldn't'-a washed me out. [laughs]

Mark: I'll bet you felt a little foolish. I'll ...

Thomas: Oh, I certainly didn't know. I thought they would wash me out if I had bad teeth.

Mark: Yeah. Yeah. Well, this is gonna seem like a dumb question but, OK, I was never in the service. So when I see things like *Twentieth Air Force, 73<sup>rd</sup> Wing, 498<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 875<sup>th</sup> Squadron* I say to myself: "OK, if you multiply those out there's like a billion planes. [laughs] Maybe more. I don't ... why ... wasn't there just one Air Force? Why a "Twentieth" Air force?

Thomas: I can't answer that question other than ... The Eighth Air Force was in England. There was another twenty ... what that the twenty ....

Mark: Twenty-First?

Thomas: One of 'em was ... there was some squadrons down in the Pacific there, down around Australia, New Zealand and around Guadalcanal. I don't know what that air force was but it was a different air force, different planes. I don't know. Twentieth Air Force was the latest air force at the time.

Mark: OK, so this has something to do with the history of the ...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: OK. So they immediately put you in the Twentieth and then 73<sup>rd</sup> Wing ...

Thomas: No. No. Uh-uh.

Mark: No?

Thomas: No, I went through nine months of training first and flying ... first started out on a single engine plane. And then gradually you got more power. You flew there for about ... oh, it was, I guess, two months you flew there and then they sent you to what they called "basic" which was a little bigger and a little bit more powerful in that airplane ... a BT13.

Mark: Can you describe your first flying experience?

Thomas: Yeah. That's when I got sick as a dog. [laughs]

Mark: What was the ...

Thomas: And we had civilian instructors. And, boy, I had a real tough one. He'd get you up there and they had a tube. He sat in the back and I sat in the front. It was two-seat and single engine airplane. And they had, instead of a radio intercom, they had this tube that he'd talk to and you had it plugged into your ears. And, man, he started yellin' and .... First day. And here I was, as sick as a dog. And I couldn't do anything right. And that took ... about the first five flights I took I got sick. And the guy told me later on, he says, "I was just about ready to wash you out," he says, "but I saw you had real good coordination. Real good coordination up there", he said, "and I decided to stick with ya." And he ... he passed me and I got to go to basic training, after there.

Mark: What do you mean you got sick? You throw up?

Thomas: Oh, yeah. Airsick.

Mark: Right there in the plane?

Thomas: Airsick. Airsick, yeah. The first time I ever been in an airplane. I never even been close to an airplane. I didn't know anything about airplanes. Didn't know the first thing about 'em. He had to take me up there and he says, "You push this stick forward and the plane goes down. You pull it back it goes up.

Mark: [laughs]

Thomas: You turn it this way and it goes to the right." See? I had to learn from day one, from scratch. I didn't know anything about airplanes and me and George was the same way.

Mark: But it turned out you had pretty good coordination.

Thomas: Uh, yeah. And then when I got rid of my sickness it was OK. I could do ... I did alright after that.

Mark: Did you ... I'm curious if you get scared goin' up in an plane.

Thomas: No, I wasn't scared at all.

Mark: No?

Thomas: No. And finally, I was one of the last ones that soloed because of that airsickness and, uh, after I soloed, why, go up by yourself.

Mark: Did it scare ya to solo?

Thomas: Oh, no. I couldn't hardly wait to get up there by myself without him in the back seat yellin' at me all the time I was up there. [laughs] I felt as free as a bird when I got up there. Oh, God, I'll tell you.

Mark: Well, now this was, uh, this was in Tennessee or this was in Alabama?

Thomas: This was in Ala ... no, this was in Walnut Ridge, Arkansas.

Isabel: You're getting' him confused.

Mark: Yeah, I'm a little confused now.



Thomas: Helena, Arkansas. I went from Maxwell Field, Alabama to Helena, Arkansas. Nice little place, nice little town. They had a nice little airport there with these primary planes and a real good place to learn to fly.

Mark: OK, so this was a single-engine plane ...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: ...that you soloed in.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: What plane was it? What kind of plane?

Thomas: It was a CPT17, I think, they called it. Single engine. In-line engine. It was one of the later models for primary flights. Before that they had the Stearman twin-wings.

Mark: Oh, really?

Thomas: This was a monoplane, just a single wing. It was a nice-lookin' plane.

Mark: Yeah?

Thomas: Yeah, it was a good plane to fly.

Mark: Did you ever fly a Stearman?

Thomas: No. I talked to a lotta guys, most of 'em did fly with Stearmans. We got into this program where they had this later model. It was a lot better airplane.

Mark: OK, so you went from the single engine, mono-wing to what? I mean, you kept movin' up, didn't ya?

Thomas: Yeah, that's where we learned how to fly, basically, is in that PT. Then you went to Basic, what they called Basic, and that was at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas. And it was a more powerful engine plane. And then we had instructors there who were military. They were lieutenants, commissioned officers. They were the instructors there.

Mark: Oh, OK.

Thomas: In the primaries it was civilian instructors. Oh, I could tell ya a pretty good story about that one, too. They'd get you up in this basic trainer, and you'd be flyin' along doin' eights and loops and stuff like that and then, all of a sudden, they'd pull the throttle back and say, "Find yourself a emergency landing." And so [laughs] I was circlin' around lookin' for a place to land. You had to figure which way the wind was goin' so that you'd land into the wind. Circled around and circled around. I finally found a pasture down there. And

that's where I was gonna land. So I brought it ... they wouldn't let us actually land. Before you landed they'd give the throttle and we'd go back up again and just see what you'd do. Well, I made a real nice approach and real ...was ready to land on that open pasture there and he took the throttle and buzzed it up in the air. And he says, "Well, you really made a nice choice there", he says, "only trouble is you'd a killed a bunch of cows if you'd a landed right there.

[Mark and Thomas laugh]

Mark: Did you ... huh?

Thomas: It was ... well, that was a good choice, except for the cows.

Mark: You woulda had hamburger down below.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Well, did they put you into stalls and things like that?

Thomas: Oh, yes. Put you in spins. And you had to find ... aw, that was nothing, though. That was ...wasn't much to that.

Mark: Because they practiced it with you or because you learned on paper this is what you had to do?

Thomas: Oh, no, they practiced it with you. You actually stalled it.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: You actually stalled it and let it get into a spin and then you'd get out of the spin and do aerobatics. Most of all you did kinda precision flying. They did what you call "figure eights" and have a building here and a building there and you'd have to around like this ...

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: ... and make perfect figure eights around 'em. Stuff like that.

Mark: Yeah, almost like aerobatics.

Thomas: Ah, well, you put your wingtip on there and go right around without your wingtip goin' off and then you'd come over here and put this wingtip on here and go around and ... figure eights. Took a lotta coordination to do that.

Mark: Yeah, uh, did you ....? I wonder what it was like the first time you went up over ... in a loop. Or what do you call it?

Thomas: A loop.

Mark: A loop.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Did you ... did you feel that? I mean, did you ...what'd you think?

Thomas: No. Centrifugal force kinda keeps you in your seat ...

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: ...until ya get to the very top. And if you're ready to stall out there, then you're hangin' and you're in your ... on your seatbelt.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Oh, and when you do a roll you're hangin' in your seatbelt ... do a slow roll or anything upside down you're hangin' with ... the only that's holdin' you in that airplane is your seatbelt.

Mark: Did you have a pretty good sense of orientation when you were up there? I mean, you kinda knew where ...

Thomas: Oh, yeah. You learn ... you learned, yeah. You see ...

Mark: Or did you depend on your instruments to tell you where you were?

Thomas: No, not instruments there, no.

Mark: Huh.

Thomas: We really didn't get into instrument flying until we went into advanced ...flights..

Mark: So then you went from this trainer up to what?

Thomas: I went to another twin-engine plane, a AT10, I think, was the name of it. It was a twin engine plane. Could put two in the cockpit: instructor and a student. And just basically did the same thing that you did back there only with a bigger airplane and a more powerful airplane.

Mark: Yeah. Well, then after that did you finally go up to the B-29s or not?

Thomas: Well, I went into B-26's. And we ...there was five of us as students and the B-26's was down in Dodge City, Kansas. And ... this instructor, I think, was afraid of that plane. And he didn't want to be bothered with some student pilots. So there was five of us and he

washed four of us out the first day. And they even called us in. The colonel even called us in. They asked us, "What's goin' on? Are you satisfied with your instructor? And, well, we said, "Oh, yeah, it's alright. So we washed out and went down to San Antonio, Texas and went to school there ... and then they finally had us go to Midland, Texas. And I was flyin' bombardier down there and droppin' bombs all over Texas ... hundred pound bombs.

Mark: Not real bombs.

Thomas: Oh, yeah. They exploded. Not real anti-personnel bombs or anything. They exploded so you could see ... they'd have targets down on the ground, circled, and you'd drop these, these bombardiers would guide your plane over this target and drop the bombs and you'd look down and take pictures of where they hit. This was basically for the bombardiers. And that's where I built up quite a bit of flying time and that's when they asked me if I wanted to go into B-29s.

Mark: Well, I don't understand why you couldn't fly a B-26 if you could fly a B-29.

Thomas: Oh, I could, but I think that ... I blamed it on the instructor. I think he was afraid of that airplane and from day one ... he washed out three good guys. I considered myself a good pilot. And one of my friends from Pennsylvania, he was a darn good pilot and he didn't get a chance.

Mark: What was, what was this, what was social life like during this whole time?

Thomas: Oh, wasn't much social life. Too busy.

Mark: Too busy with

Thomas: Saturdays, maybe weekends, we'd go out on the town but that's about it. It was pretty strict. Kept us pretty busy with school and ....

Mark: Was it hard, Tom?

Thomas: Oh, sure it was. Yeah. We learned c... learned a lot in school. We learned all about aeronautics and the theory of flight and the Morse Code and all that kind of stuff.

Mark: Oh, you learned Morse Code?

Thomas: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we had to learn that.

Mark: Could you do all the jobs of all the crew members besides your own?

Thomas: No, I ... well, I could go back and fire a gun [laughs] and somethin' like that, but I don't know whether I'd hit anything or not. But, uh ....

Mark: [laughs] So you ...

Thomas: I'd ...I give them all a chance at flyin' the plane, though. They sat in the pilot's seat for maybe ... teach them that if you push the stick down it goes down and pull it back it goes up and if you turn it this way ... gonna turn ....

Mark: So you went into B-29's then?

Thomas: After I had was ... had been to Texas flyin' those bombardiers I built up a lot of flyin' time. You had to have, I think, fifteen hundred hours flyin' time ...

Mark: That's a lot of flying time.

Thomas: ... to get into B-29's.

Mark: Oh, that's a lot of flying time.

Thomas: Yeah, quite a bit.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: But, you built it up fast there because you flew every day, flew four or five hours every day down there.

Mark: So you went from this double engine trainer ... actually, you didn't do the B-26's. You went right up ...

Thomas: Went to the 26'.

Mark: Yeah, but was there ... in flying, actually flying that plane was there a huge difference?

Thomas: Nah, not that much. Not that much. It was a heavier plane, a faster plane, more powerful. You had to bring it in pretty fast. You had to bring it in about 160 miles an hour. And that's where that guy got all excited. If he went down to 158 he'd slap your hands away from the throttles. And my friend [laughs] from ... from Pennsylvania, he slapped his hands when he had his hands on the throttle there and cut his hand, cut his finger. He just ... he just was really afraid of that B-26. It was a hot plane.

Mark: How difficult was it to fly a B-29?

Thomas: Oh, God. They say it was stuff but I thought the B-29 flew nice, flew good.

Mark: Really.

Thomas: I couldn't-a ... I couldn't-a done what I did in Superior if it wasn't a good plane to fly.

Mark: Now where were you flyin' the B-29's at? What ... in Texas?

Thomas: No, I started flyin' B-29's in Maxwell Field, Alabama.

Mark: Oh, you went back to Maxwell Field then?

Thomas: Um-hmm ... that's ... they had a B-29 base there.

Mark: So then when you took over as a pilot, uh, did you have to have – again—a certain number of hours ... in before they could ship you overseas?

Thomas: No. No, you just went through phase training and took, uh ... we ...I took the B-29 training in Maxwell Field and then from there we went into Tucson, Arizona where I got my crew together. In Tucson, and that's where Isabel and I got married, was in Tucson.

Mark: Now, wait a minute. There's a big here between not even knowing who Isabel was, romantically ....

Thomas: Well, writin' to her, you know, and home on leave once or twice.

Mark: Oh, OK ...OK. That's when you really got ...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: ... you started dating.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah. And, then, did you know right away that you were gonna marry her?

Thomas: I thought so, yeah.

Isabel: Well, he bought me a ring when he got home one time on leave.

Mark: An engagement ring?

Isabel: Um-hmm.

Mark: So the first time you went back you started dating her? First leave?

Thomas: [laughs] I don't know, what .... I don't know, what was it, Isabel? You know more about that than I do, I think.

Isabel: Yeah, when he came home the first time.

Mark: Yeah. So, then, you're now a pilot. Do you get to pick your crew?

Thomas: No, they had guys ... they took all their training and they assigned 'em at different pilots.

Mark: And then when you were down in – this was Monthan?

Thomas: Davis-Monthan.

Mark: Davis-Monthan.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: In Tucson?

Thomas: Um-hm.

Mark: OK. So now you're ... you're being assigned a crew. And then you got married while you were down there?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: So how did she get down there?

Isabel: I got down there on a bus.

Thomas: Come down on a bus, yeah.

Isabel: A long ...

Thomas: I remember meeting her at the bus station. And that's when we started gettin' ... uh, gettin' arranged ... to be able to get married in the Catholic Church.

Mark: Down in Tucson?

Thomas: Took lessons from the ...

Mark: You took lessons?

Thomas: ...from the priest down there, yeah.

Mark: Yeah, I had to take lessons, too, in the Catholic Church.

Thomas: Yep.

Mark: 'Cause my wife was Catholic. So you guys got married when you were down there ...

Thomas & Isabel: Um-hmm.

Mark: But you knew ... Isabel knew that you were gonna be takin' off for the war, right?

Thomas: Oh, I guess so, yeah.

Isabel: Yeah.

Mark: So how did she feel about that?

Thomas: [laughs] I don't know. You'd have to ask her.

Mark: I'm gonna ask you that. I'm gonna ask you that. How ...

Isabel: I probably didn't have much sense.

Mark: [laughs] Were you in love?

Isabel: I guess so [laughs] ... I'm sure.

Mark: Yeah. Well, OK, so you got married. What year was that? What's your anniversary date?

Thomas: June the first.

Isabel: Yeah, 1945.

Thomas: '45...

Isabel: No, '44.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Wait a minute. No, that ... then you've been married 65 years.

Isabel: No, must have been '43, then.

Mark: 66 years.

Thomas: No, it's 45, Isabel.

Isabel: It was '45.

Thomas: June first, 1945.



Isabel: Oh, yeah, that's right, 1945, yeah.

Mark: OK, so you've been married 64 years.

Isabel: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah. OK. Well, then, what's the progression of events from Davis-Monthan to overseas flight?

Thomas: Well, took training down at Davis-Monthan. I think it was about two months, two or three months. And that's where we got to know each other and to work together and work as a team. The gunners and the navigator and the bombardier, we did all the stuff: dropped practice bombs and the navigator had to navigate here and there and ....

Mark: Do you get pretty close as a team?

Thomas: Oh, sure. You had to.

Mark: Can you ....

Thomas: Then, that took about ...

Mark: Can you remember the names of everybody?

Thomas: Oh, yeah.

Mark: Who were they?

Thomas: Well, I had a co-pilot by the name of Bernier. He was from Whitefish, Montana. The bombardier was Joe Atrich and he was our best man when we got married, and he was from Niagara Falls, New York, I think.

Isabel: Rochester

Thomas: Rochester, New York.

Mark: Atridge? A-T ....

Thomas: Atridge. Joe Atridge. He was the youngest guy on the tour. He was only about eighteen years old, eighteen or nineteen years old. And then I had, Roger Hoffman was my flight engineer. He was from, uh ...

Isabel: Washington, D.C.

Thomas: See, she knows.

Mark: [laughs]

Thomas: And then there was ...what the heck was the name of my navigator? [laughs] He was from Toledo, Ohio and I can't think of the name right now.

Mark: Ah, you'll think of it. So, now, you guys, before you went you ...for some reason or another -- and you gotta tell me this story, now -- you flew over Wyoming.

Thomas: Yeah. I come from Tucson, Arizona. I went up to Kearney, Nebraska. And that's where I picked up a brand, spanking-new B-29. Only had four hours on it. Beautiful airplane. Nice, shiny, nice beautiful airplane. And from there we flew to Sacramento, California. And from Sacramento, Hawaii, Kwajalein, Guam, Saipan. First flight we ever had over the ocean. Very scary. Took off at midnight. Didn't know where ...anything about flyin' over water, you know, and never flew over water and it was kinda scary.

Mark: Well, now, tell me about one of the most famous events in your pre-war flight, your pre-war history.

Thomas: [laughs] Was that when I buzzed Superior? Oh, well ... well, I knew I was gonna fly over there at a certain time and I knew we were gonna get there about nine o'clock. We left Kearney I think around, I don't know what time it was, seven or eight, somethin' like that. And I called 'em up, called my sister at the ...we, they had a phone there at the Union Pacific Store there. That's the only phone, in town. And I told 'em we'd be over Superior in such and such a time, and I was supposed to be up at 20,000 feet. And just one plane. There was a lotta planes but we weren't flyin' together. We took off at different times at different hours. No one was close to anybody, so I decided to give 'em a little thrill down there ... and went over Superior once and flew past it and the B-29's a big plane. You can't hardly maneuver it around too good. It takes ya miles to get turned around. And then on the last pass I was pretty close to the ground. I'd say I was within maybe a hundred feet, maybe a little less than that. I had to pull up to go over the top of the schools [laughs].

Mark: [laughs] Could you see people below?

Thomas: Oh, sure, yeah.

Mark: Could you see your mom and everybody?

Thomas: Oh, I don't know, I was pretty busy watchin' what I was doin'. My co-pilot was lookin' out the window and, oh, they were all enjoyin' it, the gunners and everybody really enjoyed it. And I made one good pass over 'em and told my sisters, "Don't say anything because if you do I'm liable to get into trouble. So the next day in the paper, here it was in the paper that "B-29 pilot circles Superior". [Thomas and Mark laugh]

Mark: Did you get into trouble?

Thomas: No, nobody ever found out about it. Nobody ever knew about it. So what would they do to me? I was on my way overseas. They weren't gonna keep me from goin' overseas.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: That's what I figured. Well, I, it was a dumb thing for me to do, though. I coulda killed a bunch of guys.

Mark: Well, you don't feel bad about it, do you?

Thomas: Oh, no. Hell, no. I was tickled to death. It was one of the biggest thrills I ever had, flying ... Superior.

Isabel: Everyone in Superior was out watching. I was on the train. I think I was in Cheyenne at that time on the train going home.

Thomas: Yeah, I passed her train, I know that.

Mark: Didja?

Thomas: Yeah. I didn't give it a buzz, though. I just passed it, that's all.

Mark: [laughs hard]. Well, how fast do those B-29's go at that level?

Thomas: Well, probably goin' over Superior about 300, 350 probably.

Mark: Wow.

Thomas: Cruising speed on a B-29 was 220 miles per hour.

Mark: Is that all? That wasn't very fast, was it?

Thomas: Well, compared to what they do this day and age.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: It was a lot faster than the 17 and the 24. And you could push it up to 300 if you wanted to, but cruising speed where you had your best mileage and best gas consumption and the best performance outta your engines was 220 miles per hour.

Mark: Yeah. But normally, you say, you're flying at 20,000 feet.

Thomas: Yeah. They assigned me that altitude.

Mark: Yeah. So did you then go from ...uh ... you buzzed Superior, you went to Sacramento.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: And then you landed and filled up and then immediately ....

Thomas: Stayed there overnight. No, we stayed there overnight, yeah.

Mark: And then took off.

Thomas: Yeah. Next day we took ... the next ... midnight of the next day we took off and headed for Hawaii.

Mark: Why was flyin' over the sea so scary? I don't understand.

Thomas: Well, just bein' over the water, I guess. Didn't bother me after that. Once I did it, it didn't bother me but it was kinda ....

Mark: Thinkin' about ditchin', you mean?

Thomas: Yeah, if you had to land or crash you were gonna crash in the ocean. If you didn't get killed in the crash you was gonna drown. So [laughs]

Mark: Did you guys wear parachutes?

Thomas: Oh yeah.

Mark: Everybody wore all their gear.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: And now was that cabin pressurized?

Thomas: Yes.

Mark: Was it normal ... I mean, on the B-26 was it pressurized?

Thomas: No, none of 'em were pressurized except the 29. It was the only one that was pressurized.

Mark: So you didn't have to wear oxygen equipment.

Thomas: Huh-um. No, not unless you had a hole blown in your ... in your plane and lost all the decompress ... you were decompressed.

Mark: Yeah, yeah.

Thomas: See, I had an oxygen mask right there. We usually had 'em hangin' right here [bumps microphone] so that you could put 'em on if you wanted to.

Mark: Did you have your portrait taken like that, with your oxygen masks? Some of the pilots did.

Thomas: Oh, yeah.

Mark: Your picture? Did ya?

Thomas: Well ... what's that?

Mark: Your picture? Did you have your picture taken with it?

Thomas: There's one of 'em that ...picture someplace ... not with my oxygen mask on, but just sittin' in a plane and havin' my earphones, and the oxygen mask was hangin' down here.

Mark: Yeah. Tom, did you have any fears when you went into war in that plane?

Thomas: I don't think so. I was afraid. There is no doubt about that. I don't think anybody wasn't afraid that .... You had to fly 3,000 miles non-stop. You just spent a few hours, maybe an hour over enemy territory but it was pretty spooky. Takin' off with a full bomb load ...

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: ... ten tons of bomb, ninety-five hundred gallons o' gas, and four engines that you hoped kept workin' [laughs]

Mark: Did you ever have any mechanical problems?

Thomas: No, I was pretty fortunate. Well, I did down in Tucson. That's another experience that you might be interested in. When I was training down at Tucson we were up on a night training mission and, uh ... we got up and I guess it was around 10,000 feet. And at night you're supposed to wear your oxygen mask, any altitude above 10,000 feet. Well, we got pressurized and somethin' happened to the doggone, uh ... one of the doors, one of the doors in the ... back in the Bombay blew open and we lost -- decompression -- so we had to come down. We had to come make an emergency landing. And we made that emergency landing. And it just happened that ... I shoulda told you about getting' ... takin' these lunches up there with us. The lunches came in aluminum heaters. And they were trays and you pulled out the trays and you'd eat these lunches, hot lunches. And we just got through eatin' those lunches and the thing decompressed and so we hadda come in and make an emergency landing. Landed at night and taxied over to where we parked the plane and as soon as the engines were shut off I could feel myself getting' sick. And I got out and I threw up all over the place behind the plane. Just got terribly, terribly sick. I went, and they took me to the ... took me, and everybody in the front of the airplane got really sick bad, all of us

throwin' up, couldn't hold anything down. And I got back in my barracks and I got to gettin' cramps all over my body. If I moved my little finger I got a cramp in it. If I moved any part of my body I got ... just stiffened up like that and it was just, it was terrible. Terrible, terrible. And so they called the flight surgeon and he come and took a look at me and my co-pilot. And he says, "Get these guys to the hospital." And so we ended up in the hospital and we found out that it was ptomaine poisoning ...

Mark: Oh, really?

Thomas: ... from the food. I guess the aluminum trays contaminated the food and I think we had some kind of metallic poisoning from the aluminum. And it was just ... just very fortunate that we got down when we did. That's one place where I said somebody up there was lookin' out for us. It just all happened: we lost decompression, we had to come down ... come down and just got on the ground, shut the engines off .... Before the engines were even shut off I was out there spewin' my guts all over the place.

Mark: And everybody else was, too.

Thomas: Well, nobody in the back of the plane, just the ones in the front. And I was the worst one. I don't know why it affected me so bad. They put us on ice chips for about three days. Nothin' but ice chips, no food. And I finally got better and went back to work. But they had a big investigation over that.

Isabel: Yeah, both him and the co-pilot were both sick so ...

Thomas: Yeah. There was nobody could land the plane. Just a few more minutes ... just everything worked out precisely. I got down on the ground and got sick.

Mark: Back to the air base.

Thomas: If I'd a been up there another five minutes I woulda never been able to land that plane.

Mark: And nobody else coulda done it either.

Thomas: No. Hmm-um.

Mark: Whoa.

Thomas: Pilot ... co-pilot could but he was as sick as I was. I don't think anybody was as sick as I was. I was really sick. I thought I was gonna die.

Mark: You came back to the base? Yeah. So now you said, you traced these little hops you made from San Francisco ... uh Sacramento ... you went from Sacramento to Hawaii?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: To what field was that?

Thomas: It's the field that they've got there now. I think they've called it Robin's Field or somethin' like that. It's different now. It's where they, where the planes land now, all the jet planes ... at that field.

Mark: And you didn't stay there long?

Thomas: Just one night, that's it.

Mark: And then you took off and landed where?

Thomas: Kwajalein.

Mark: Kwajalein.

Thomas: Kwajalein Island.

Mark: And then you went to ... from Kwajalein you went where?

Thomas: To Guam.

Mark: That's one of the Marianas.

Thomas: Yeah. That's where they told me whether I was gonna be on Guam, or Tinian or Saipan. And that's where I got my orders to go to Saipan.

Mark: So then you go to Saipan. And how long were you in Saipan?

Thomas: Oh, I guess I was there about a year ...all told ... the war.

Mark: Oh.

Thomas: The war ended while I was there.

Mark: Right.

Thomas: And, uh ....

Mark: What was your assignment? What did you do for that year?

Thomas: Well, we were flyin' missions, for one thing.

Mark: Yeah. Well, tell me about these missions 'cause I'm curious about these missions.

Thomas: Well, they were somethin' to behold. They were fire raids at night. One mission that we went on was Toyama, a city of about 200,000 population. We destroyed the city. Ninety-nine point nine destroyed. The most perfect raid of the war.

Mark: How many B-29's flew on that one?

Thomas: Well, there was, uh ... there'd be so many in our group which was about – was it 200 planes? Naw, there wasn't that many. About a hundred planes. Single file, one at a time ...

Mark: Single file?

Thomas: ... at night.

Mark: Why didn't they fly in box formations?

Thomas: Because we were gettin' the hell kicked out of us by runnin' out of gas and not hittin' the target, and flyin' from high altitude. That's when LeMay come over there, see, from England. We were flyin' at thirty, thirty-five thousand feet over Japan and they were hitting this wind at terrible ... that real fierce wind up at that altitude at 200 miles per hour and they couldn't hit anything from up there. If you were goin' with the wind your bombs went miles and miles past the target, and if you were against it you were practically standin' still so you dropped your bombs way short. And we were losin' a lotta planes by runnin' outta gas and the fighters were gettin' up there and knockin' 'em down pretty good and so Lemay came over there and he changed it all. He says, "We're gonna go in single ...each individual plane. When I was there it was between nine and twelve thousand feet, and usin' these firebombs that we had.

Mark: What did they look like?

Thomas: Well, they were clusters of bombs. The bombs were only about that big around but they were in a cluster ... like that, strapped together. And you'd drop those and about a thousand feet above the city they would explode and scatter all over the place. And this ... they had what they called that liquid jell, liquid gasoline. And it just burned the hell out of everything. Terrible. Terrible thing.

Mark: Yeah ... yeah. Now, he flew one at a time and at a low altitude. Why did you fly at night?

Thomas: Because they didn't have any ... the Japanese didn't have any good night fighters. Didn't have to worry too much about being intercepted. The only thing you had to worry about was anti-aircraft fire.

Mark: Did you get hit?

Thomas: Yeah, got hit once.



Mark: Didja?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Describe that. What was that like.

Thomas: Oh, it wasn't really bad ...just a big hole in the tail of our ... this was on a daylight raid ... over Osaka. One of the last missions of the war. I ... we got hit pretty good. We were after a target there, the Osaka Army Arsenal where they built all kinds of munitions there. And they tried to get that several times during the war. Then on this last day we knocked it out, finally. But it was pretty tough. It was ....

Mark: How badly damaged were you?

Thomas: Oh, it didn't hurt the controls at all. Didn't know about it until the tailgunner calls up and says, "Hey, there's a big enough hole here for me to crawl in through." [laughs]

Mark: It didn't affect the flight of the plane.

Thomas: No, huh-uh. It didn't bother it all.

Mark: Where was it? In the tail?

Thomas: Yeah, in the tail section. But some of that stuff was pretty close. You could hear 'em rattle under there, and they'd explode.

Mark: What was it like? Thunder? I mean, how did sound?

Thomas: I couldn't ... you couldn't hear most of it. You were by it before you got the sound. The ones that you didn't hear was the ones you hadda look out for.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: It was spooky.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. I can imagine. Now, according to what I read last night, LeMay actually removed a lot of the guns ... from these ships.

Thomas: They didn't do that to our planes. I don't know, they musta done it when they first started fire-bombing at night because I still had a full crew, all the gunners, and everybody else was on the crew and we didn't remove any guns.

Mark: How many did you have in your crew?

Thomas: Eleven.

Mark: So can you point out where they were? 'Cause I don't know how all the people are situated. No, I mean, in the plane. You had a pilot....

Thomas: Pilot and co-pilot. And behind the co-pilot was the flight engineer. And behind me was the navigator.

Mark: What was the difference between the navigator and the flight engineer?

Thomas: Flight Engineer took care of all the instruments and, uh ...

Mark: Oh, OK.

Thomas: ... make sure that they were all operating properly and watched the temperatures and all that stuff. He had a big bunch of instruments in front of him that he had to know what he was doin'. He was a pretty important guy on missions and ... he figured out how gas we had left and what the landing speed should be and how fast you should bring it in on final approach so that you wouldn't stall out. Stuff like that. He was pretty important to the plane.

Mark: So then you had four ... pilot, co-pilot, engineer, navigator, that's four..

Thomas: Yeah, and then we had a radio operator back there, too, the same area. Then you had this long tunnel to go back into the, where the scanners were, the gunners. We called them scanners back in those days. And we had three scanners there, one on each side of the plane and one in the bubble above ...on top of the plane. And then there was one in the tail gunner. There was six up front and five in the back.

Isabel: You forgot the bombardier down under you.

Thomas: Yeah Bombardier. Bombardier was in front of us.

Mark: OK, so ... pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, navigator, bombardier, and then you had six scanners.

Thomas: Five, I think. [laughs]

Mark: OK, I musta missed something ...

Thomas: Pilot, co-pilot, navigator, radio operator ...

Mark: Oh. Flight engineer ...

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: OK. I missed the radio navigator.

Thomas: Yeah. There was six in the front and five in the back.

Mark: Didja ever have any problems with not havin' enough gas to get back?

Thomas: No, we managed OK. We managed OK. There was a lot of 'em ... I saw a couple planes that had made ocean landings. Landed in the water. And on our way back we'd see 'em. If you were getting' close to losin' ... losin' all your fuel, all you had to do was land at Iwo Jima and you'd fill it up and then you could come all the way home.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: It was another good experience, too, landing on Iwo Jima.

Mark: Why was that?

Thomas: Oh ... the tough battle that they had there. We lost 7,000 marines there.

Mark: Yeah ... yeah.

Thomas: We were there, we landed ... and once they told us that there was bad weather on Saipan, so they advised us to land on Iwo Jima and we landed there and, uh ... oh, what a hell-hole that was. Went to the cemetery there, the Marine cemetery, they hadn't shipped all of the bodies back to the United States yet. They were still buried there and they just had little tiny wooden crosses on these graves. And there was around 5,000 of 'em up there, buried right there, and that was really heart-rendering.

Mark: How many missions or flights did you have?

Thomas: I only had only five. I flew a coupla missions, prisoner of war missions after the war was over. And I was up there the day they dropped the atom bomb.

Mark: You were?

Thomas: Yep. That's my only claim to fame [laughs]

Mark: Where were you when you say you were up there?

Thomas: I think it was about 150 miles south of Hiroshima.

Mark: Were you making a raid?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Dropping bombs?

Thomas: Yeah, we were droppin' bombs on Yawata steel works. And it was at the same time, right around eight o'clock in the morning. And my left scanner claims that he saw the flash ... of the bomb. And, I guess, it's possible 'cause, hell, we were up 30,000 feet and you could see a long way. And a flash like that. He claims he saw it. He was in the right place lookin' out of the left side of the plane. Hiroshima's that way. I didn't see it. I was too busy.

Mark: Yeah ... did you ...

Thomas: But on our way home that day they ... we used to listen to the radio broadcasts ... and they said that they'd dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and it was a successful mission and one bomb just destroyed the city. And, boy, we were tickled to death. We were happy as could be. We thought, boy, we were gonna go back to Saipan and we were gonna load up with atomic bombs, everybody was gonna have an atomic bomb in their plane and we were gonna go up there and we were gonna finish the war. [laughs] We were tickled to death. We were happy. We celebrated. Oh, boy, we heard about that we was tickled. We didn't have any sympathy for the Japanese at those days.

Mark: Well, how do you feel about it now?

Thomas: I don't know. I think that it was the right thing to do because we saved a lotta lives. We killed a lotta people there, about 80,000 I think, somethin' like that. And then there's 100,000 of 'em died after that ... radiation burns and stuff ... but, uh, like that book, "Lemay" I got there .... Lemay was a guy that wanted to get the war over. He didn't think in terms of how many people are lost, or how many civilians were killed or ... Didn't bother him none. He wanted to get it all over with so we could all come home. And that's just the way he believed. And I think it was right at that time. They learned a lot by ... when they invaded Saipan and when they invaded Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Okinawa was the worst one that we had. They lost 12,000 guys there. And Iwo Jima was terrible. It was 7,000. In just a matter of a few days. I think, uh, I think Iwo Jima was 31 days. They thought it was only gonna be a matter of two or three days, maybe a week, and it would be over. But that thing lasted ... these guys were dug in there and they couldn't get 'em. They just fought and fought and fought and killed a lot of our boys. And they figured, well, they could see it was getting' worse. It was harder to invade and be successful in a short period of time. So they ... "What's gonna happen if we invade the Japanese islands? And they were getting' ready to invade them. They had the troops and ships and everything on their way there to invade Japan. And they figured it would cost us a million casualties. And probably four or five million Japanese. So which was better? Drop a bomb that would kill 80,000 or have an invasion that would kill millions on both sides.

Mark: Yeah. Does it ...excuse me

Thomas: Iwo Jima and Okinawa were terrible. Iwo Jima, when we landed, boy, I was just ... I was heartsick when I saw all those crosses out there. You can't imagine how big, how many crosses 5,000 crosses are. You just can't I imagine. You gotta see it. And then these were just these little wooden ones. They aren't like the ones that ... over on Normandy where

they have these nice, all in a row you know. And they had 'em in a row over there and all the names on 'em.

Mark: But when I ... I don't know, this is tough subject. But when I asked you how you feel about it now you said you didn't know. Does that mean you have second thoughts?

Thomas: Well, I think we did the right thing. I just ... I just felt ... you ever see a little Japanese girl, a little Japanese boy? They're cute little buggers How many of those people did we kill? [long pause] Tough. It was a tough decision but I think it was right.

Mark: Is it hard to live with?

Thomas: Oh, no ... don't bother me. Hell, no.

Mark: Really?

Thomas: No. We just ... once in a while you think about it. I was all in favor of it. [draws a breath]

Mark: Some guys have dreams about it. Do you have dreams?

Thomas: No, no.

Mark: Do you ever have dreams?

Thomas: [laughs] I have dreams but I don't dream about that. No.

Mark: OK. Well, uh, after that bomb was dropped on Hiroshima then did you quit your raids after that?

Thomas: Yep. We flew some prisoner of war missions.

Mark: Yeah, what was that all about?

Thomas: They loaded up a bunch of supplies on fifty gallon barrels and had parachutes on these barrels. And they ... you know, magazine, clothes, shoes and stuff like that. And they give us coordinates up there in Japan and told us to go up and look, see if you can find these prisoner of war camps. They sent war to these prisoner of war camps to get up on their roofs and paint big "PW" ... "PW" on it and then we'd go up there and find these prisoner of war camps. That was really a delightful thing to do. We found this one prisoner of war camp and, uh, dropped the bomb ... uh, dropped the barrels on 'em and, boy, you could see those guys up on the roof. They didn't have anything but shorts on and they were up there wavin' and they were a happy buncha guys. You could just see that some of 'em were there four or five years and them Japanese weren't very nice prisoner of war keepers. They were terrible, mean, ornery son of a guns. And so it was really a wonderful thing that we did there, drop the supplies on 'em.

Mark: Yeah. That gave you a good feeling.

Thomas: Yeah. I flew a coupla missions like that and, uh ...oh, on one of those missions one of the barrels hung up in my bomb bay. It didn't go out. So I circled around and I ... what I shoulda done, I shoulda went up the inland sea there and dropped it in the ocean. But I said, told one of my gunners, [ , sounds like "Back-dry"] I says, "When I tell ya, now, you cut the shrouds on that barrel and we'll let it fly ...whenever we try to get it in the compound there. But as it was, as soon as you start cuttin' it went down and it hit a Japanese house and just pulverized the house. I hope nobody was in that house, I don't know.

Mark: You could see that from that altitude.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: How far, how high were you when it was dropped?

Thomas: Oh, just a couple thousand feet.

Mark: Oh, OK.

Thomas: We were down close to the ground.

Mark: OK.

Thomas: Then, just for sport [laughs] ... there was an area right in there ... there was a bunch of rice paddies, I guess they were. And there was a road right in the middle of those rice paddies that just was straight and it went for miles. And there was a bunch of people, Japanese people -- farmers, I guess -- goin' from someplace to someplace. And the road was crowded and they were all on this road. So I decided to give them a buzz. [laughs] And I did and, oh, God, they took off on that road and they were trompin' out in those rice paddies. You know, a rice paddy's all water. And you could see them goin' out there. I guess they thought maybe we were gonna shoot 'em or something because they sure got the hell out of there. We though that was pretty funny, but that wasn't a nice thing to do, either. Those poor people had a ... had a lot to do ...

Mark: Well, you didn't ....

Thomas: ... a lot of misery.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. Then did you go back to Saipan? And did you never get into Japan itself? On the ground?

Thomas: No, during ... when they signed the treaty up there they had a buncha B-29's but our group didn't get in on that. They had 400 B-29s flew over that Battleship Missouri

when they signed the ... but our group didn't get in on that. We were flyin' prisoner of war missions. I guess that was our ....

Mark: Were you glad when that was all over?

Thomas: Oh, sure. Gotta tell ya about that, too [laughs]

Mark: OK.

Thomas: We were in the officers' club and we were celebratin', a bunch of us. First lieutenants were sittin' around this table, and we were drinkin' beer and havin' a good time. We were ... and I was sittin' there and all of a sudden I turned and there was a guy that sat there next to me. And I just didn't see him. I saw him. I turned around and there he was. He was sittin' there and he had a Twentieth Air Force patch on his sleeve there. And I was feelin' pretty good, and I fondled that Air Force patch there. Nobody wore those things over there, you know. I says, "Well, look what we got here, a man from the Twentieth Air Force. And he turned around, and he looked at me. He had a star on his collar [laughs]. He was a general. General O'Donnell that I was tellin' ya about the other day.

Mark: General O'Donnell.

Thomas: And he turned around and he said, he says, "What did you say, corporal?" [laughs again]. And I says, "Oh, geez," I says. I says ... if I coulda crawled under that table I woulda crawled under that table. But, anyway ... then another kid come up there and he says, "Who in the hell stole my beer?" And he took the beer from in front of the general and took two beers and looked at ...when he saw that star on the guy's, the general's collar, why, he went out and got a whole tray full of beers and come and set 'em in front of the general.

Mark: [laughs]

Thomas: Well, we were havin' a good time there. We were singin' and havin' ... and singin' some good songs ... and the general just joined us there. The colonels and all them were tryin' to get him away from us and he kept sayin', "No, no, I can handle these guys." He says, "I'm alright". And I was ... I liked to sing some of those old harmonizing songs, you know, like "The Bells Were Ringing for Me and My Gal" and stuff like that, "Poor Black Sheep, Baa, Baa, Baa." All of those. And after it was over with and they finally talked him into leavin' he come up to me and he says, "Well", he says, "I'm gonna give you your commission back", he says, "because you sang so good.

Mark: [laughs] Oh, in other words he called you "corporal" 'cause you'd been ...

Thomas: Oh, yeah. Hell ...

Mark: ... you'd been busted from what? Lieutenant?

Thomas: Yeah. I was busted from a lieutenant down to a corporal.

Mark: To a corporal. Was he a pretty good guy?

Thomas: Oh, yeah, he was a great guy. He's buried down in Colorado Springs at the Air Force Academy. I went down there and played golf there, oh God, several years ago and I went to visit his grave. His nickname was "Rosie" ... Rosie O'Donnell. Fact, one of those leaflets in one of those ... uh, got a picture of him.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. But that wasn't his first name. His first name was like, it started with ...

Thomas: Emmett.

Mark: Emmett, yeah.

Thomas: Emmett Rosie O'Donnell, yeah. Nobody called him Emmett. It was always called him "Rosie".

Mark: Now was he in charge of the Twentieth Air Force? No, no...

Thomas: He was in charge of our wing.

Mark: Your wing, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Wing.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: OK.

Thomas: Yeah, he was the "Big Caboose".

Mark: [laughs] Did you ever meet LeMay?

Thomas: No, I never did. But Rosie, he flew missions with us. If it was a tough one he was there. If it was an easy one he wouldn't fly. Good guy, real nice guy.

Mark: Did you ever meet F.D.R.? [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]

Thomas: No, but in training ... down at Maxwell Field when we were in training down there he visited our field there and they warned us. We were cadets back in those days. And they told us not to pay any attention to the people that were comin' in that day. "And you keep busy. Don't be stoppin' and lookin'" So he passed within about, probably, a hundred feet of where I was on the road. And I was punchin' the bag. I never saw him.

Mark: You were punchin' the bag?

Thomas: Yeah. That's exercise, PT [physical therapy].



Mark: Oh. Was he in a wheelchair?

Thomas: He was into that car. I couldn't tell if he was in a wheelchair. I didn't see him. They just said he was in a long ... a big 'ol car and it was a open, convertible-type, big limousine. And they just drove by and that was the end of it. There wasn't much to it.

Mark: Well, didn't you say that you saw Anthony Eden? Or was he ...

Thomas: No. Oh, I wanted to tell ya about O'Mahoney [Wyoming Senator].

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Well, after the war was over we ... just sittin' around there doin' nothin' and they started flyin' the B-29's back to ... back to Hawaii. And then from Hawaii on into the United States. And, uh, they assigned me to take one of the B-29's, to fly it back to Hawaii. And they said "You gotta passenger to with ya". And so I said, "OK, fine". And so the guy come up and he ... put him in ... when he climbed into the plane I looked at the sheet and it said, "O'Mahoney" on there. And I says, "Are you any relation to the senator from Wyoming"? He says, "Yeah, I'm his nephew. I'm Frank O'Mahoney. [laughs] And so that's where I got to know the senator quite well because Frank O'Mahoney was a colonel in the Air Force. And he was goin' back to the United States. And so he flew with me from Saipan all the way to Hawaii. Sat right in front of me in the bombardier's seat. And we had a good session there, talkin' about Wyoming and all that and ....

Mark: Did you get homesick?

Thomas: Oh, sure. I was ready to come home. In fact we tried to talk him – that Frank O'Mahoney – to lettin' us fly him all the way to the United States. "Well", I says, "why can't you do that? Why can't you say that you'd like to fly and ... you're goin' back to Washington, aren't ya?" And he says, "Yeah, I'm goin' back to Washington" he says. [and I said] "Why don't ya see if you can't get us to take you all the way?" And he says, "Oh, I don't think I can do that", he says, "I'll put in a word for you and see what happens" but we never heard anything from him.

Mark: Well, this is Frank, this isn't Joe.

Thomas: Frank, yeah.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah, his nephew.

Mark: He was goin' back to D.C., Frank was.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: OK.

Thomas: Yeah..

Mark: Well, had you seen, from the time you started your raids and left for Saipan, had you seen Isabel? Or did you not see her until ...

Thomas: No. Called her up when I was ... when I flew that B-29 back to Hawaii. Called her up from Hawaii. That was only .. that was the only chance we got to talk to each other.

Mark: So how long a period was it from the time you got married 'till the time you saw her again?

Isabel: A year.

Mark: A whole year?

Thomas: Yeah, I guess it was a year.

Mark: Oh, man. Well, you know ... I tell ya, Tom, it's now about ten o'clock. I can't believe we've gone on this long. I'm wondering ... can we finish up with your life tomorrow. I mean, I want to know more about your turbine ... work on turbines and some of the projects.

Thomas: OK.

Mark: Can we finish that up tomorrow?

Thomas: Yeah, that'd be fine.

Mark: OK. And then what I was thinking was, it wouldn't take us too long to do that. I'd like to sit down and talk with Isabel a little bit. Is that OK with you?

Thomas: That's fine. Let's get it over with.

[Mark and Thomas both laugh]

Mark: Tom, you're makin' me feel bad.

Thomas: [laughs] No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that

Isabel: He doesn't mean that ...

Thomas: ... I didn't mean it that way.

Mark: I know you didn't. I know. I'm just pickin' on ya. OK, well, let's do that. Let's talk a little bit tomorrow about comin' home. And then your postwar experiences, your children

and grandchildren and so forth. Oh, by the way, when you were [talking to Isabel], you weren't pregnant, were you? You didn't have ....

Isabel: Yeah.

Mark: You were pregnant?

Thomas: Yeah.

Isabel: I had Brent when he came home.

Mark: Oh, what was the ....

Isabel: He was about a month old.

Mark: Oh, what was that like? To see your kid?

Thomas: I don't know. I was ... I was just happy to get home.

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: I ... it was s different. Took me a while to get acclimated ...

Mark: Yeah.

Thomas: ... to be a civilian and not worry about flyin'.

Mark: Yep.

Thomas: ... and the rest of it.

Isabel: Like finding a job and....

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Well, OK, so what we'll do, then, tomorrow ... now you sure this is OK? At eight o'clock?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: That time doesn't bother ya?

Isabel: No, that's a good time, in the morning.

Thomas: That was fine.

Mark: And I love this ... this idea of writin' down things? If you can think of anything else like early or wartime experiences ...

Thomas: Yeah, OK.

Mark: ... do that.

Thomas: If I think about it, yeah.

Mark: That was really valuable.

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: And, uh ... OK, so we'll wind it up tomorrow and then, Isabel, we'll put you on the mike. We won't talk for eight days.

Thomas: [laughs]

Mark: Maybe [laughs] Is that OK?

Isabel: OK

Mark: OK, good. Alright, so we're gonna quit for today. [end of second interview session]